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Viewpoint

The Yurchenko debacle

By GEORGE A. CARVER Jr.

Vitaly Yurchenko is a once and perhaps future KGB officer on whom much American attention has recently been fixed. Until last Monday, he was touted as the most important, valuable defector the CIA has ever snared. On that fateful Monday, he suddenly surfaced at a late-afternoon press conference in the Soviet Embassy claiming that he had been forcibly abducted in Rome, drugged and spirited against his will to the United States. He further claimed that he was held under hostile duress

until Nov. 2, when he was able to escape his captors and reach his Embassy's interim sanctuary, from which he wanted to return to Moscow. This he did on Wednesday, leaving a welter of questions and recriminations, not to mention embarrassment, in his wake.

Yurchenko's claim that he was forcibly abducted, in Italy, then held under duress in the United States, is palpably specious. As I know from having run defection operations, any CIA officer senior enough to approve one would recognize the folly of trying to fudge or evade the ironclad requirements for documented certification attesting that a putative defector's actions are entirely voluntary and uncoerced. Particularly in the wake of the Church and Pike Committees and everything symbolized by "Watergate," any such idiocy would inevitably leak, swiftly, provoking the outraged wrath of, among others, various Inspectors General, the Intelligence Oversight Board in the White House, and the House and Senate Oversight Committees, not to mention that of the U.S. press and media — which would resemble sharks in a feeding frenzy. Also, from the other side, Yurchenko's

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claims on this score almost exactly parrot the similarly specious claims of Oleg Bitov — a Soviet journalist (cultural editor of the Literary Gazette) who defected to the British in September 1983 — supposedly to protest Soviet treatment of intellectuals and the shoot-down of KAL 007 — then resurfaced in Moscow in August 1984, claiming that he had been abducted, drugged and tortured by British Intelligence. This is standard Soviet fare, since the Soviet Union will never publicly admit — or

allow any Soviet to do so — that any Soviet official could voluntarily leave the *rodina*, the socialist "Motherland." Furthermore, if Yurchenko had been anything like the prisoner he claimed to have been, he would never have made it to the Soviet Embassy in Washington.

More interesting is the unanswered question of whether Yurchenko was a Soviet "plant" from the outset — always under KGB control, following KGB orders — or was an initially genuine defector who had a change of heart and mind three months after he came to the United States. This question may not now, or ever, be definitively answerable — outside the KGB's Moscow headquarters.

Though the "plant" theory is intriguing and cannot be disproved, I find it much less persuasive than its rival. Operations of this multiple-cushion, bank-shot complexity are far easier to write about in novels than to essay in real life, especially given the pervasive validity of Murphy's Law. In Yurchenko's case, furthermore, the inevitable risks of any such operation would seem to far outweigh any likely gain. While the Politburo and the KGB might relish embarrassing President Reagan and the CIA, especially during pre-summit ma-

neuvering, I find it hard to imagine anyone in the KGB being willing to concur, officially, in taking the enormous risk of allowing an officer as senior as Yurchenko, the deputy head of the KGB's North American section, to spend three months in American custody under total U.S. control.

The "initially genuine defector who reconsidered" hypothesis, conversely, is eminently plausible. Indeed, the more one considers it, the more plausible it becomes. In my opinion, those who would understand the Yurchenko case should throw away their spy novels and look carefully at their friends and associates — or in their own mirrors.

Defection, in many respects, is very similar to separation and divorce in private life, or to walking out on a previously close emotional relationship. At the time of departure, political or personal, adrenaline is usually pumping. The prospect of a new life and situation expected to be far happier, and new associates expected to be far more congenial, often produces a crest of euphoria — plus an exhilarating sense of newfound freedom, often almost compulsively reveled in and exercised. In defectors as well as former spouses or lovers, however, such highs are often followed by equivalent lows. Doubts and second thoughts replace euphoria with depression, and a Slavic depression can be very black indeed.

This, I believe, is what happened with Vitaly Yurchenko. Any defector, especially a Russian one, is prone to violent mood swings and needs very adept, careful handling — especially in the initial months of that defector's adjustment to his, or her, new life. Professionally adept and careful handling, however, is precisely what Vitaly Yurchenko did not get. Instead, he was handled in ways that seem to have been scripted by the Marx brothers, then implemented by the cast of *The Gong Show*.

George Carver retired from the CIA in 1979 after a 26-year career, during which he was special assistant to three directors of Central Intelligence, deputy for national intelligence to two directors of Central Intelligence, and served for three years (1976-79) as chairman of the U.S. Intelligence Coordinating Committee in Germany. He is now a senior fellow at Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies. He wrote this article for The Herald.



For openers, it was hardly wise to debrief a defector this important and sensitive in a safehouse near Washington, and the Soviet Embassy. This may have been administratively convenient, but it was operationally idiotic. It was even less operationally astute to take him to dinner in a Georgetown restaurant within walking distance of the Soviet Embassy, accompanied by only one or two U.S. companions.

Among the many unfortunate consequences of our mesmerized fascination with technological collection, which developed over the past decade, and one of the most unhappy legacies of Adm. Stansfield Turner's disastrous tenure as director of Central Intelligence during Jimmy Carter's presidency, has been a greatly diminished ability to handle delicate human operations with requisite, successful professionalism. The kind of experienced officers who could and would have anticipated Yurchenko's inevitable mood swings, recognized the warning signs, known precisely what to do, and then effectively done it — in Russian — were considered expendables of minimal value by Turner. I can think of two in particular who would have been brilliant with Yurchenko, but both were forced into retirement during Turner's 1977 purges.

Quite apart from any despondency engendered by his general handling and the apparent rejection of a desired lady, who seems to have been one stimulus to his defection, Yurchenko's mood was clearly — and understandably — further blackened by the reckless and negligent abandon with which the information he provided was handled and leaked. He would have instantly known, for example, that the newspaper and television stories about his having confirmed Nicholas Shad-

rin's murder by the KGB could easily prove to be nails in the coffin of his own wife and son. I doubt if it is a coincidence that the Shadrin story hit America's front pages and television screens on Oct. 28 and Yurchenko appeared in the Soviet Embassy, for his press conference, exactly one week later.

One of the most delicate aspects of handling any defector is deciding how much latitude to allow him during his or her initial period of adjustment and debriefing. You want the defector to feel a part of the team, a valued and trusted new colleague, not a prisoner always under suspicion; but it is not in your interest, or the defector's, for you to be foolish. Striking the right balance requires experience-honed judgment, and it was apparently not struck with Yurchenko.

In his mood of normal depression, he probably made telephone contact with one of his many friends in the Soviet Embassy to ask about his wife and son. After that, the scenario is easy to write. The Soviets doubtless reminded him, forcibly, that his wife, son, family and associates would all have to pay for his transgressions if he did not come to the Embassy and follow orders from that point onward, returning to Russia soon thereafter. This he there-

upon did, not surprisingly.

For the next few weeks, even months, the Soviets will endeavor to wring all the propaganda mileage they can out of Vitaly Yurchenko — using him, specifically, as an object lesson to any in the KGB, or elsewhere, who might be thinking of working with or defecting to the Americans. After that, to drive the lesson internally home, Yurchenko will probably take a one-way trip to Lubyanka's cellars and get a bullet in the base of his skull. If he is lucky, his death will be quick, but he may well not be so lucky.

For the CIA and for many others in the U.S. government, at all levels, the Yurchenko debacle is, or should be, an object lesson in how not to conduct human intelligence operations. If we prove unwilling to learn those lessons, our store of valuable human sources may further dwindle and our supply of future defectors could easily vanish. We will never be able to prove or measure what we have lost, but potentially valuable human assets in the Soviet Union — and elsewhere — could hardly be expected to want to put their reputations, careers, fortunes and very lives hostage to the quixotic amateurish ineptitude that marked the whole U.S. government's handling of Vitaly Yurchenko.